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Racial Microaggressions: Stories of Black Candidates in a Teacher Preparation Program at a Predominately White Institution

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the perspectives and experiences of ten Black students at a predominantly White institution in order to understand if they were recipients of microaggressions, what impact microaggressions had on them, and how they coped with the microaggressions. Findings indicate that all but one of the participants experienced microaggressions that were perpetrated by peers, professors, and/or institutional cultures, with microinsults and microinvalidations being most frequent and microassaults less prevalent. Relationships with mentors, peers, and community organizations supported students and countered the experience of microaggressions. While participants rejected the role of spokesperson as it perpetuated their lack of individuality, they acknowledged the challenge of talking about race as the only Black student in a class. Findings highlight the need to develop and utilize civil discourse to stem the prevalence of microaggressions experienced by Black candidates in teacher preparation programs.

Effective teacher preparation programs (TPPs) model for candidates the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching. One method TPPs employ to achieve this goal is the use of civil discourse, defined as “robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest” (Brousseau, 2011). Certain forms of racism undermine this goal. For Black students, college campuses are often “hostile, alienating, and culturally insensitive” (Karkouti, 2016, p. 59). A 2015 study of racism at the University of Illinois Urbana campus found that 51% of students experienced microaggressions (Harwood, Choi, Orozco, Browne Hunt, & Mendenhall, 2015). Boysen and Vogel (2009) report that 40% of professors report microaggressions in the classroom. Microaggressions are subtle insults that are usually unintentional. So slight are these offenses that recipients are often unsure if they experienced a microaggression and do not react for fear of being perceived as overly sensitive. Likewise, perpetrators are usually unaware of their transgression (Sue et al., 2007). As a result, these microaggressions are not identified and discussed, which may create a negative racial climate (Harwood et al., 2015) and negatively impact students’ academic performance (Bair & Steele, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to discover if Black candidates in our TPP experienced microaggressions, their impact, as well as how candidates responded to them. Findings will inform TPPs about ways to educate students, faculty and staff about microaggressions, how to address them, and how to support recipients.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study uses critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical framework for examining microaggressions in a Teacher Preparation Program (TPP). Adhering to the first tenet of CRT, we assert that racism permeates all aspects of TPPs. One way racism manifests itself in TPPs is through microaggressions—“every day, commonplace, and often ambiguous forms of racism faced by people of color” (Grier-Reed, 2010, p. 182) which “stem from

unconscious attitudes of White superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority” (Davis, 1989, p. 1576).

This study gives voice to the Black candidates who have experienced microaggressions from their professors, classmates, and institutional structures. Ladson-Billings (1998) maintains that telling one’s stories can “lead to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated” and be a “medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (p. 14). Furthermore, hearing these stories can affect the oppressor by serving as a catalyst to disrupt dysconscious racism—a form of racism that tacitly accepts White norms and privilege. These stories can assist the oppressor in understanding the intricacies of racism and begin a process of redress (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14; King, 1991, p. 135). Stories from Black candidates can provide insight to guide civil discourse and support the development of more socially just TPPs.

Microaggressions

Pierce (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1977) defined microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders” (p. 66). Microaggressions are insults so slight that the perpetrator and recipient are often unsure of their occurrence. Naming these offenses and characterizing their nature and impact reveals the hidden insult and has the potential of providing both the recipient and perpetrator with linguistic tools for recognition and atonement.

There are three types of microaggression: microinsult, microassault, and microinvalidation. A microassault is an “explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). For example, students may use the word “ghetto” to mean “bad.” Microassaults are overt actions while microinsults and microinvalidations have a subtler tone. A microinsult demeans a person based on their race, culture, or identity (Boysen, 2012). A microinsult could be a teacher complimenting a Black student for being articulate, thus implying that the Black student was expected to be inarticulate. Finally, microinvalidations “exclude, negate, or nullify

the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential realities of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). A microinvalidation could be when a teacher states “I don’t see color in my classroom,” thus erasing student identity and experience. Identifying the types of microaggressions can facilitate nuanced understanding of racial oppression and support civil discourse on the topic in TPPs.

Impact of Microaggressions

Microaggressions by definition are small, but the impact of microaggressions on Black candidates in TPPs can be significant. Microaggressions can create a negative racial climate leaving recipients frustrated, isolated and full of self-doubt (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), create psychological stress (Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, Wallace, & Hayes, 2011), and negatively impact academic performance by impeding their ability to process information (Bair & Steele, 2010). Furthermore, Sue, et al. (2007) believe the subtle nature of microaggressions creates a degree of internal conflict as the recipients attempt to determine if they experienced a microaggression before determining if and how they should react. Perpetrators are often unaware of their transgression and the offense is perceived to be so slight that any response is considered “overreacting” and responding with anger can confirm existing stereotypes (Sue, et al., 2007). Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) maintain that any discussion of racial microaggressions must include the examination of racial stereotypes and their impact.

Purpose of the Study

To ensure that candidates have the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective teachers, TPPs engage students in civil discourse involving an “informed, frank exchange of ideas, along with an understanding of complexity and ambiguity” (Brosseau, 2011, para. 7). However, the subtlety and ambiguity of microaggressions means they are often ignored and unaddressed through civil discourse. While microaggressions may be subtle insults, the harm they do can be significant—creating a hostile and culturally insensitive climate that negatively impacts the emotional

and academic well-being of Black candidates.

The purpose of this study was to examine Black candidates’ experiences in a TPP at a predominately White institution (PWI) through the following research questions:

1. Are Black candidates experiencing microaggressions?
2. What impact are microaggressions having on candidates?
3. How are victims responding to microaggressions?

Method

Participants

This study used a qualitative interview approach. Data was derived from a 2016 study (Dinkins & Thomas, 2016), examining the persistence of Black students in a TPP at a PWI, wherein researchers noticed participants reporting experiences of microaggressions. The current study resulted from reanalyzing the original data. Participants were selected from Black students who enrolled as education majors from 2005 to 2015. This purposeful sampling yielded 20 possible participants. Ten Black students, seven females and three males, agreed to participate. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data consisted of hour-long, individually conducted semi-structured interviews. Researchers inquired into participant backgrounds, reasons for selecting the PWI, curricular and social experiences on campus, and factors that influenced participants to leave or remain in education. Data analysis utilized a three-phase process. The first phase involved deductive readings of the entire data corpus to identify instances and contexts of microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults. The second phase used an inductive approach to determine the ways in which participants were impacted by and responded to the microaggressions. Researchers identified patterns across participants, yielding ten possible themes. The final phase identified three themes capturing participants’ experience of and responses to microaggressions.

Findings

Data analysis substantiated the pervasive experiences of microaggressions across participants, as well as strategies used in response.

Experiences of Microaggressions

All but one student experienced microaggressions perpetrated by peers, professors, and/or institutional cultures, with microinsults and microinvalidations being most frequent and microassaults less prevalent. Six students experienced microaggressions as part of their on-campus experience while three students experienced microaggressions as enmeshed with their K–12 experience. Table 1 (*facing page*) displays the experiences in a university context, and Table 2 (*page 84*) displays the experience in K–12 contexts. Robin did not report a direct experience of microaggression, but described adhering to an “unwritten code, which means that ‘we’ve got your back’ just by looking at them. It’s not just Black students. It’s anybody that’s not white”; thus, implying a shared identity and protectiveness within the PWI.

University-based microaggressions were perpetrated by peers, professors, and staff. The microinsults, all perpetrated by peers, reflect a lack of awareness that left participants stunned. Jennifer was puzzled by the motivation behind her peer’s comments that made her uncomfortable throughout the class. Daria ascribed the comments to lack of experience, while recognizing the dissonance of a future teacher using “inappropriate” language. Multiple members of the university community perpetrated microinvalidations, with professors named as offenders by two participants. Tiffany’s and Tamara’s identities were literally ignored. Tiffany’s professor did not see her racial identity, leaving her feeling invisible while Tamara was denied her right to represent Blacks in the membership of an otherwise all White student group. Michael’s experience demonstrates the overlap between microaggression types. The professor’s refusal to address his questions shifted from a microinsult about writing ability to a microinvalidation that ignored his needs. The microinvalidation experienced by Monique reflects

Participant	Examples of Experiences	Microaggressions Type & Offender
Daria	...there was some inappropriate use of terms ... like certain terms like ‘oh that’s so ghetto’ and certain things like that. ...And that was kind of one of the things that made me scratch my head when I heard my peers in the education department saying it.	Microinsult perpetrated by peers
Monique	One of the girls, an education major, was like, ‘Well, I posted all lives matter’ and then they got mad at me when I was like, ‘You just don’t understand.’	Microinvalidation perpetrated by peers
Jennifer	I’m sitting next to a girl and she looked over at me and told me that she’d never been to school with a black person before. For the life of me, I don’t remember what prompted that or why she would even disclose that. I just remember feeling so awkward and thinking, ‘How is that even possible and why would you blurt that out?’ ... After that I felt like I was under a microscope for the whole class.	Microinsult perpetrated by a peer
Tiffany	One teacher ...was giving the demographics of the class. He said, ‘We don’t have any African American students in here.’ I was like, ‘What? I’m here.’ I had to speak up and that was kind of awkward. I had to speak up in the middle of the class and everyone was kind of looking at me like, ‘Oh my God, did she just come out in class?’ He apologized the next class, but the damage was kind of done.	Microinvalidation perpetrated by a professor
Tamara	I was in the [first generation] program and I saw that they had a picture and they posted it and the whole picture was white. Like how did I miss this? Like I was in it. Why didn’t I get invited to the program? I emailed the lady and she was like, “Oh, sorry. We just forgot to invite you.” I could have been in the picture. I could have represented, you know? But everybody looks at that picture and thinks, ‘Oh, these are the only people who represent this.’	Microinvalidation perpetrated by a staff member
Michael	I had one professor—my papers would come back terrible. She’d paint them in red ink. I’ve always had a pretty high regard for my writing based on the feedback from other teachers and professors. So, I started taking my papers for other people to look at including the writing center. They’d still come back bloody. Once I tried to have a conversation with her about it after class. She didn’t care to address the issue and was saying that I needed to come back later. I went to her after class to talk about it. I wasn’t getting anywhere so I struggled through the class and let it end.	Microinvalidation perpetrated by a professor

the university context and the larger context of race in America, implying Monique had to explain her anger.

Table 2: Participant Experiences of Microaggression in K–12 Context

Participant	Examples of Experiences	Microaggressions Type & Offender
Kevin	I didn't want to be a disciplinarian. I didn't want to be wanted by the school because I was a tall guy and I was a black guy and I could intimidate students into acting better. It seemed that that was the only value they saw in me as a black male, was that I could scare someone into acting right the rest of the day and I just didn't want to do that, you know? ... And I had a friend who was a teacher's assistant and whenever a child acted bad, they sent them to him. The stigma of, 'OK, you're a black male so you must have friends that act this way.' I wasn't up to that task.	Microinsult perpetrated by K–12 institutional culture
Brandie	There's such a negative connotation towards African American children just in terms of the misbehaving of children and how they disrespect their elders and stuff like that.	Microinsult perpetrated by K–12 institutional culture
Lawrence	The students that I talked to in a specific way, or that I acted a specific way that I was kind of acting white. I kind of explained to them that there is no way to really act white or black. This is my personality. You can either take it or leave it.	Microinvalidation perpetrated by K–12 students

Microaggressions experienced in the K–12 setting reflect institutional cultures. For Kevin, Brandie, and Lawrence these experiences reflect stereotypes of particular behavioral expectations. Kevin's and Brandie's experiences reflect Black children as discipline problems in schools. The microinsult Kevin experienced speaks to the expectation that he, as a Black male, would embody a 'scary' persona intimidating students into compliant behavior or automatic understanding for students who struggled. Both reflect damaging stereotypes about Black males. Brandie's experience encapsulates the microinsult that Blacks are expected to act in particular negative ways. Lawrence was denied his identity as a Black male because he was expected to act differently than White students. A common theme across these participants is the manner

in which racial stereotypes permeate experiences in K–12 schools.

Four participants reported microassaults. Brandie and Tiffany attended an on-campus event when an anonymous social media network was flooded with insults disparaging Black students' place at the university. Monique reported having a roommate "who kept saying the n-word." In these overt actions of racism, peers used language to demean. In the K–12 context, Daria reported witnessing Black students being "written up" for language White teachers interpreted as disrespectful while she "might understand it as a sign of respect because of the cultural background, and I understand where he's coming from versus not understanding." The disciplinary action functioned as a microassault that penalized the students for their cultural background. For these four participants, microassaults served to marginalize students and disempower their position in educational settings.

Seeking Support

Relationships with mentors, professors, peers, and community organizations supported students and countered the experience of microaggressions. All but one student reported strong relationships that provided safe spaces where participants felt encouraged and supported. For Tiffany, Brandie, and Robin these were campus-based peer relationships. Tiffany described the Black Student Union as providing "a family aspect" with students of color. Brandie described a "diverse" peer group that fostered a strong sense of community: "A couple of them come from small towns and I've been able to broaden them culturally. It's very weird but it's very cool. Our differences brought out our similarities." For five participants, professors acted as mentors by facilitating positive discussions about race and privilege. Robin appreciated talking about "how your identity influences how you teach and where you teach." Tamara found discussions about race in K–12 classrooms provided "a hope" for supporting students that "may be going through troubles at home and need extra push or motivation." Monique valued classroom conversations led by a Black professor that pushed students to think about the role of Blacks at the PWI:

“Representation is so important. When we come on campus, literally, mostly all the people of color are making bagels or changing the trash ... I wish that class was a requirement for all students because it was great.” Participants valued opportunities to challenge the dominant culture on campus and in education.

Rejecting the Role of Spokesperson

While valuing discussions about race, participants rejected the role of spokesperson for the Black community, with five students speaking directly to this tension. Brandie described, “I’m usually the only African American student, ... It would bother me if something came up directly related to race and they directly asked me. I understand they want my opinion, but there’s kind of a fine line for that.” Tiffany and Tamara acknowledged how this tension erased their individuality. Tamara reported: “You kind of feel yourself getting eyed out. ... It’s just the expectation that since you’re a black person you can speak to how all black people feel and you’re not regarded as an individual.” In these situations, Tiffany clarified, “I’m not speaking for every African American. I’m just speaking from my viewpoint. We are all gonna believe totally different things.” While only three participants reported having a Black professor, this tension was made more palatable by their presence. Jennifer described how a Black professor led an activity, designed to make privilege visible, which involved students stepping forward or back depending on advantages and obstacles. She and another student of color wound up at the back of the room as inadvertent representations. Jennifer recalled, “When he started his questions, ... I thought ‘I’m going to end up at the back of the room’ so you tuck whatever you feel and do the activity.” She explained that because she “understood he was trying to convey to the class that other people grew up differently” she was “okay with it.”

Discussion and Implications for Practice

It is not surprising that all but one participant experienced racist microaggressions in the TPP program at our PWI. As noted by Davis (1989), the “cognitive habit, history and culture” (p. 1576) of

White privilege makes faculty, staff, students unable to hear such utterances. Educating faculty, staff, and students about microaggressions has the potential to disrupt the pattern Davis notes. TPPs can take steps to reduce their occurrence and impact.

TPPs can start by increasing faculty, staff, and student awareness of their own biases and recognition of microaggressions. Naming these racist acts begins the process of eliminating them. When microaggressions occur, they must be confronted. However, faculty are ill-prepared to facilitate these difficult discussions (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Boysen (2012) found that faculty and students believed that it is imperative that faculty respond to these incidents. Furthermore, while students felt the most effective way to address microaggressions was speaking to students outside of class, both students and faculty indicated that faculty-led discussions were an effective response. This finding was supported by additional research; Sue et al. (2009) found that students wanted teachers to address microaggressions through civil discourse in the classroom. Students stated that professor-led discussions legitimized dialogue about race and validated their feelings (Sue et al. 2009, p. 188). TPPs should add questions about racial climate to course evaluations to assist in monitoring their occurrence and identify opportunities for additional training and education. TPPs should also include faculty “diversity engagement” in the promotion and tenure process (Harwood et al., 2015, p. 16).

TPPs can also take steps through civil discourse to reduce microaggressions perpetuated by students. Properly trained faculty can create safe classrooms that enable difficult discussions. Students indicate that faculty facilitated discussion is imperative to successfully addressing microaggressions, and research indicates that confronting microaggressions can reduce the microaggressors’ future use (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). Acts of microaggression by students can also be reduced through education. Diversity and inclusion courses can be developed and included as part of candidates’ required program of study. Finally, TPPs can provide ongoing workshops, training, and brochures on microaggressions to assist students in identifying when they happen and how to

address them (Harwood et al., 2015, p. 16).

To reduce the impact of microaggressions, TPPs can make students aware of safe spaces including Black student and Greek organizations, and other organizations that serve Black students (Solorzano et al., 2000). Safe spaces provide a place for Black students to engage in civil discourse with others and “(a) make sense of their experiences on campus and determine whether a racial microaggression has even occurred, (b) find support and validation for their experiential reality, and (c) identify alternative ways for responding to such incidents” (Grier-Reed, 2010, p. 183). Furthermore, safe spaces connect Black candidates with individuals who share their experience and provide a sense of belonging, which are important for retention (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). TPPs should also ensure that Black candidates are assigned mentors who share similar experiences. Research indicates that mentors can guide them in successfully managing microaggressions and assist them in learning from them (McCabe, 2009).

Participants’ stories provide insight into the lived experiences of Black students in a TPP in a PWI. Future research should focus on how Black education students would like to see microaggressions addressed in university and K–12 classrooms. Future research should also explore the lasting impact of microaggression on candidates. Additional studies may also examine the interactions between recipients of microaggressions and offenders and how civil discourse could foster more socially just education.

This study, along with previous research, (Boysen, 2012; Harwood et al., 2015; Sue et al. 2009) affirms the need for higher education to enact civil discourse focused on issues of race. Faculty, staff, and students should be trained to identify and address racial microaggressions through increasing awareness about bias, challenging stereotypes, and strategies to engage in difficult conversations. Safe spaces for students of color should be established so that they share their experiences and foster relationships with others. Additionally, campuses need to provide and communicate pathways for students to report incidents of bias and

microaggression. These reports should be tracked and examined to document trends over time to inform stakeholders on appropriate courses of action.

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